

Chapter 47

The Education of Roma Children: Challenges and Promises

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ABSTRACT

The education of Roma children presents many challenges throughout the world because of poverty, issues of isolation and discrimination. In many countries where Roma reside, laws exist that prohibit discrimination against this minority group. A variety of conflicting issues exist for Roma children. On one hand, the Roma communities practice cultural norms that are in conflict with a typical schooling environment that requires significant structure and lack of independent support. Conversely, schools fail to provide appropriate bilingual instruction for Roma children who usually do not speak the local language. In most countries discrimination attitudes create segregated schools and insufficient social services. Many efforts and organizations are in place to positively impact these challenges to provide quality education for all Roma children.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-1933-1.ch047

INTRODUCTION

What images does the word Gypsy bring to mind? Generally, those images are negative and fueled by stereotypes. People who claim this ancient heritage go by many names and associations and by whatever name, this divergent group of people represent the largest ethnic minority throughout the world. In Europe alone the estimate is 12 million people. In the United States there are 1 million and in South America, 2 million. For this chapter the term Roma will be used to refer to this ethnic group, although that descriptor is not always accepted or used by those who are being described. As an ethnic minority, generally, the life of such a group is sadly defined by poverty, isolation and discrimination. Even though laws against discrimination exist in the many countries where Roma reside, significant challenges exist for the Roma.

Several major initiatives have been undertaken to begin to address this systemic crisis. The year 2015 marked the end point of two very different development agendas. Both intended to direct funding and actions of governments, donors, civil society and businesses towards the elimination of inequality and poverty for the most disadvantaged populations: the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Decade for Roma Inclusion 2005-2015. The latter was a joint initiative between governments, civil society organizations, international non-government organizations and agencies to eliminate discrimination against Roma people, and address major gaps in equity through targeted investments in education, employment, health and housing. The intended beneficiaries of both development agendas have much in common, mainly the struggle to survive (Klaus & Marsh, 2014).

The education of the Roma children presents many challenges throughout the world. There are many reasons for this including the poverty, isolation and discrimination leveled at all Roma. For example, the significant exclusion of Roma children from educational opportunities and segregation within education systems are two of the most significant challenges facing Europe's education systems (UNICEF, 2011). Teachers, however, are engaged in their daily classroom work with practical strategies that lead to student social and academic success. Establishing culturally and linguistically specific provisions and services builds self-confidence and ensures that the traditions and identity of Roma children is positively nurtured prior to facing what is generally perceived to be an antithetical environment that exists towards Roma in the wider society (Hancock, 2000; European Roma Rights Center, 2016a).

An international effort to provide early education throughout many of the former Soviet satellites has had a long history since 1991. George Soros and the Open Society Foundation provided many levels of educational support. Three major efforts were created. The Reading, Writing and Critical Thinking Initiative which was designed to help K-12 teachers learn critical thinking strategies related to language arts. Eighty university faculty volunteered over a five-year period in more than 20 countries to deliver a curriculum for this purpose. A second action was the development of debate societies at the high school level to again create a society that could question and challenge. A third initiative was the creation of the Step by Step movement. This initiative established NGOs that were devoted to early childhood education and maintains a fiercely committed process through the International Step by Step Association. Partially funded by the Soros organization, each country is fully committed to free early education for all children. A recent effort to begin educating children from birth to age 6 is underway. At the core of the effort of Soros and many others is the goal of creating a population that can support the ideals of a civil society which includes the ending of the kinds of discrimination and exclusion so clearly experienced by the Roma population.

This chapter will discuss the educational situation for the Roma broadly and contains the observations of many colleagues who are working with the Roma in their countries. This chapter will discuss

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